

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You're listening to Work In Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Work In Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators and decision-makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges. You may already know Guild Education. We've talked and written about the company before. For those of you who don't, Guild works with employers such as Walmart, Target, and Chipotle to offer education benefits and training opportunities for those companies' employees. Earlier this month, Guild announced the appointment of its first chief opportunity officer, Terrence Cummings. And Terrence joins me to talk about what he's going to be doing with the company. Terrence, welcome to the Work In Progress Podcast.

Terrence Cummings, Guild Education chief opportunity officer:

Thank you. Very excited to be here.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So this is a first of its kind job at Guild. Before we get into details, I think I pretty well explained what Guild does, but maybe you want to go into a little bit more detail and explain to the audience just how your company works.

Terrence Cummings, Guild Education chief opportunity officer:

Excellent. Guild unlocks opportunity for America's workforce, especially focused on the frontline. And you mentioned this before, but the way that that manifests itself is we work with large companies. So think about Fortune 1000 companies. And we help them to build out their education benefits, and then we run those education benefits programs with them. And what's really special about this is that we get to understand, what are the talent strategies of these companies? What are they looking to do with their frontline workforce, but just their workforce overall in general? And how do we align learning, skilling, educational programs to be able to maximize their efforts around talent? And then both push forward and advance the career opportunities that their individual employees have and also their own talent strategy right alongside it.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've had this conversation with your CEO, Rachel, quite a few times. And I find it really interesting that the companies that you're working with and part of their strategy bringing you in is that very thing is let's develop internally, but let's make sure that there is opportunity for people to take the education that they have gotten because of the company, and then move on to something else they may want to do.

Terrence Cummings, Guild Education chief opportunity officer:

Yeah. It's amazing. We've loved seeing how companies have embraced, especially over the last few years with Guild, but even over the last decade or so, embraced what their talent needs are and have seen that symbiotic relationship. I don't like using consulting terminology, but I will here, apologies, that symbiotic relationship that exists between the benefits for employees and the benefits for the company as a whole when it comes to development.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

In the past, I don't know that Guild has actually been involved on a granular level with those companies to make sure that they are driving that mobility and career opportunity. Is that where you step in?

Terrence Cummings, Guild Education chief opportunity officer:

I'm going to correct one thing there. From day one, Guild has been involved in driving opportunity and outcomes at a granular level with companies and with employees, but we're doubling down on those efforts. And so we're at the point in our company where we're elevating what we're doing there, we're making sure that we focus on it. I always like to say that if you want to understand something, you measure it. And if you want to improve it, you focus on it. And what we're doing here is saying we've had success here, we've been driving this forward, but let's elevate it up. Let's elevate it to the C-level when it comes to this new title and role that you mentioned, as well as making sure that we're elevating and doubling down on the investments that we're making in that regard.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And so tell me how you're going to do that. What are the tangible steps that you're taking to make sure that is happening at an even greater level?

Terrence Cummings, Guild Education chief opportunity officer:

Let me first start off with giving a little bit of background into my experience at Guild. So I've been at Guild for almost six years. And in my first role at Guild and my first focus at Guild, I ran the employer partnerships team at Guild. So as you mentioned, Walmart, Chipotle, my teams are the teams that worked with those employers directly to understand their talent strategies and to drive that forward. I mentioned that to say that personally, as an individual, an employee of Guild, I have a very deep understanding of the talent needs of the companies that we work with. And then over the past three years, I've been running what we call our member services teams at Guild. And so that's the team that provides support and coaching to the employees of our employer partners, so that they are able to not only succeed in school, but also succeed in their careers.

And so if I put those two worlds together, to get to your question, what we're tangibly doing is saying, how do we take the learning of what we've experienced and what I personally experienced as to the needs of the talent and the needs of the employers and put those things together? And so what that looks like, I talk about packaging serendipity. It's a phrase that means a lot to me because no matter how much talent an individual has, if you come from the wrong background, if you might have the wrong skin color, if you didn't go to the right high school, the right elementary school, sometimes maybe you didn't have the right support network or parents, it is serendipity to be able to get to where you want to get to in life. And so I say, how do we package that serendipity for our members and learners?

And what that means is, how do we try and understand their aspirations better even than we do today? How do we understand what their obstacles are? How do we understand what their potential accelerators are? And then start to double down on those needs. And so an example of a blocker might be access to technology in some cases. It might be access to a support network. It might be time management and being able to understand, how do I manage my schedule or work with my employer to get a different schedule? When do I do my homework? So some of those obstacles are things that we tangibly are going to continue to invest in and double down on the member side, the member and learner side. By the way, members are what we call the employees of our employer partners that join the Guild network, and learners are those members once they enroll in school. A quick check on terminology.

And then on the employer side, what we're doing is also doubling down on understanding the very granular talent needs that they have. So that might be a specific role or set of roles they're looking to fill, not just today, but also in the future. And then additionally, understanding how does someone navigate this employer. If you are a cashier at Walmart, you might be working in Store 2936. I'm not sure where that store is located. I just made that up. But that store might be in Idaho, which is different than Bentonville. And so understanding if I want to go and work at headquarters in Bentonville, what does that mean for how the talent strategy, the navigation works inside our company? And so it's getting to understand what that looks like inside the company, tying that to some of the tangible needs that I mentioned of the workforce and saying, how do we help to connect those threads?

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

What are you doing to signal that to the employees? How is it different in each company?

Terrence Cummings, Guild Education chief opportunity officer:

So the core offering is the same. It's standard across our companies. However, just as we do when we're building out what we call our learning marketplace or the program catalog, educational institutions and the programs that we offer for companies, there is a different approach that some companies may have than some other companies. So there's a standard offering of what we say, "We are a career opportunity platform. If you sign up with Guild, you are getting the coaching that we provide, the support that we provide. When we put out new products or services with regard to opportunity development, you get all that. And we understand your unique talent needs." And so that might mean that we might send out specialized emails that talk about opportunities that are your company in particular. It's different to navigate a Chipotle versus a Walmart versus a Disney. And so we will have unique content that we can provide that help your employees to navigate. But at the core, it's very similar and standardized across the way that we work across our employers.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

As a company, do you find that the members are taking advantage of those benefits at any higher level now that we're getting out of COVID or during COVID? I'm trying to get a set level on where the participation is.

Terrence Cummings, Guild Education chief opportunity officer:

Yes. So obviously, during... I don't know what to call it, it's not a pre-COVID and post-COVID world. It's difficult to understand. But at the heart of the pandemic, lives were different. And education and employment fit inside of one's life. And so we certainly during that time saw different participation. And oftentimes people may have been taking more classes at times during that, and sometimes they might have been taking less depending on what they needed to do. Now that we're on the back half, I'll call it, of the pandemic, we've started to see things normalize a bit more. And so getting to the type of participation both from a percentage of worker capacity as well as the number of credits and classes that people are taking, we're starting to see that normalize a little bit. I think it's going to continue to progress as people understand what the world is going to look like on the other side. But we have started to see that normalize.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So your job is to help economic mobility. And you've been with the company for six years and you've been involved in this. Do you have any plans for changing how you're doing this? Or is that a company secret that I shouldn't know yet?

Terrence Cummings, Guild Education chief opportunity officer:

What I can say right now is that we will be doubling down on what we're doing. And what that's going to lead to are things like taking a phrase that we often use with our employer partners is developing a culture of opportunity. And it's going to be more clearly defining what that means, what the different aspects of that are, and how we can start to, to use the word that you mentioned earlier, attack different parts of that more aggressively as needed depending on the populations that we're serving. And so that's where we are current... That's as much as I can share currently as far as where we are, is we're going to be doubling down efforts. We're going to continue to do what we've done before and sitting at this unique intersection between our educational partners and our member and learner stakeholders in figuring out how do we know when to double down with which populations at which times, but it's largely doubling down.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So Terrence, what does success look like to you?

Terrence Cummings, Guild Education chief opportunity officer:

I'll first start off with at the aspirational level. When I think long-term, and ultimately what this role means to me, is that it creates a world in which everyone at Guild has a successful foundation to build their career at or beyond Guild. And I say that because one thing I didn't mention is my role is focused not only in the members and learners, but also internal Guild employees and building out our culture of opportunity. And so everyone at Guild will have a successful foundation to build their career at or beyond Guild. Everyone at Guild will be able to feel belonging. That's one of our core values every day. And every member and learner will have a clear path to the middle class.

So at the aspirational level, that's what success looks like. And so we're going to continue progress towards those goals. And something that we have been measuring and we'll continue to measure specifically is around salary and role changes for our members and learners. So we've seen success there in the past. To give you a couple tangible examples of that, from an internal mobility standpoint, you are 2.2 times more likely to have internal mobility with inside your company if you are a Guild learner versus someone that is not engaged in Guild. We've seen a 2.4 times likelihood of wage increase for learners in Guild versus those that are not.

And so we've seen success there. And we'll continue to make sure that we're not only seeing the same success we've seen in the past, but with anything you double down on, continue to see greater success there. And so that's where we've said intentionally to start, we want to make sure that we're looking at that metric and continue to drive that. And change always starts from within. And so going back to my point around not only being focused on our members and learners, but also our internal employees is we have to make sure that we are continuing to drive inside of Guild. And we can learn more about what a culture of opportunity looks like, how to build that, how to define that for America's workforce and companies. And then we can teach and guide employers along that route as well.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I always think that's an important part and that's why I like my role at WorkingNation is telling people about those opportunities. And I've shared this on the podcast before, is that I came from a lower middle class family in Illinois, that nobody had gone to college. Nobody understood what opportunities there were. I had to find my own way, scratch and claw my own way to finding those opportunities, and then taking advantage of them. And I love that companies where people might start out their careers, like Walmart or Target or Chipotle, is building that ladder for success and putting that stuff out there. So that's why I've always loved talking about Guild because I do think that they are attacking the issue and the challenges where it starts and where people don't know where to go from. They don't know what opportunities there are. So that's just my little soapbox because I'm very, very much for that, making sure opportunities are out there. Okay. So I just told you my personal story. What is your personal connection to your role?

Terrence Cummings, Guild Education chief opportunity officer:

Thank you for sharing a personal story. And what has sparked for me is going back to something I mentioned earlier. According to society, as you can see here, but the audience can't, I'm a Black man. I was born in the wrong skin. I was born in the wrong socioeconomic class. I was born in the wrong place. I was born in Washington, DC, and that was during a time when Washington, DC was the murder capital of the world. We had a mayor that was using crack while in office at the time and being arrested, for those that remember DC at the time. My family didn't have a lot of money back in those days. My father was in jail. And that's a story that often tells itself. And so I mentioned packaging serendipity. And to get from there to here, it took me being in multiple right places at multiple right times with multiple right people again and again and again.

And to give a few examples of that, I have a mom who had both the love and the strength to remove me from an abusive household, and then send me to go live with my aunt. And then I had an aunt who served as my first coach as well as my guardian. She asked me the hard questions to teach me through questioning and exploration, how I could survive in this world as a Black man. And then I happened to work in a burger restaurant later on where I happened to serve a burger to a man named Jim Collins, who's a famous business author. He wrote books called Good to Great, Built to Last, and others. And through conversations in that burger restaurant, Jim Collins happened to see something in me where he said, "Why don't you come work for me?" And I went to go work for Jim for a while. And then Jim introduced me to a company called McKinsey.

There was a senior partner at the time named Bill Meehan at McKinsey. And I met him and he said, "I don't know how we're going to do this, but you should come work for this firm." And he managed to get me in. And that's just a series of events that could have gone many, many different ways, and the list goes on. And I can't describe that in any other way, but serendipity. And I should mention, I found Guild. And Guild is a company that has a mission to connect people with talent that are working on the front lines, like working in a burger restaurant, to opportunities that help that talent to rise in order to grow their careers. And that's me. And so as I think about what workers need, my aim is to make sure that they don't need that level of serendipity to get from where they were or where they are to where they're going to be. We can package that for them through Guild.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I love that you bring up the serendipity part of it. That is an important part to me, too. I always say my own life is a series of serendipitous meetings. John Hultman, I always say his name out loud because he was my news director at the very first station I worked at. Because I've worked in radio and television and I answered phones, and he gave me a chance to be a writer. I screwed it up totally. He gave me

another chance and helped guide me along the way. And then I had a series of other mentors who saw something in me. So I think that's an important story to tell. I'm really glad that Guild found you. So that's really great. Thank you, Terrence, for sharing both your personal story and the story of Guild and your new role there. New role since you've been there for a few years. I really appreciate you joining us on the Work In Progress Podcast.

Terrence Cummings, Guild Education chief opportunity officer:

Thank you. It was a pleasure speaking with you. And I'm glad we had an opportunity to share and talk about more of what we're doing.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've been speaking to Terrence Cummings, the new chief opportunity officer at Guild Education. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.